

DUCK HUNTING: A Great Salt Lake Tradition



Tom Wharton/The Salt Lake Tribune

Hunter Tom Aldrich and his retriever enjoy many idyllic mornings hunting ducks together on public marshes like Farmington Bay.

A Man and His Dog Enjoy an Early Morning Hunt at Farmington Bay

The lights of Salt Lake City flickered on Farmington Bay as duck hunter Tom Aldrich launched his specially designed boat into the murky waters.

Rip, a droopy-eyed 10-year-old labrador, tried not to show his enthusiasm for the hunt, but it was obvious.

Calls of ducks, geese and shorebirds came from distant shores. Occasionally, shadows of waterfowl drifted across the moonlit bay.

A cold chill gripped the early-morning darkness as Aldrich headed toward his three specially designed blinds, which poked above the surface of the water. Two coffin-shaped contraptions on the north and south would hold duck hunters. Rip would stand in the smaller, middle blind.

Aldrich studied engineering before becoming a wildlife biologist. He has not lost his love of building and designing.

"I invest lots of time and effort in the off-season making things," he said. "I make my own duck calls. And I designed these blinds."

He calls the hunting platform — constructed by pouring fiberglass into a plywood mold — a "stealth" blind. The coffin-like shape of the invention is typical of standard designs. But a few ingredients are secret, and hunting partners are asked not to say much about the set-up.

Aldrich quickly tossed dozens of decoys around the open-water blind. He placed the big goose imitators closest to his shelter, now partially submerged.

This chore complete, the hunter took the boat several hundred



Tom Wharton
Outdoors Editor

yards away from the blind. He and Rip walked back in the cold, shallow water as the first light peeked over the mountains.

Spiders crawled out of the marsh and into the coffins. Aldrich ignored them and moved into an almost prone position, his shotgun resting on the lid of the blind. Shots from the New State Duck Club to the west shattered the silence.

Thousands of ducks lifted off the water. A falcon flew overhead, no doubt worrying the birds.

"It's almost as if the falcons do that just to harass the ducks," Aldrich chuckled.

The sky was now pink. Airplanes roared to and from nearby Salt Lake International Airport, breaking the idyllic silence. Rip's droopy eyes searched the horizon for ducks.

Suddenly, a flock of teal zoomed past — close enough that Aldrich could hear their wings beat.

He rose to shoot, but not a single teal fell. Rip gave his master an accusatory glance. The hunter just smiled.

A few moments later, dozens of long-billed dowitzers zipped inches above the hunter's head. They flew in zany patterns, obviously unaware of human presence.

A redhead hen flew into the de-

coys. The little duck preened, weaved and danced around the decoys. Aldrich, who tries to avoid shooting hens, marveled at her beauty before watching her fly away.

Flying ducks were plentiful, allowing the hunter to choose his prey. He elected to shoot a limit of three teal and one gadwall.

On the final pass, Aldrich killed two ducks with two shots. This confused Rip, who couldn't decide which bird to retrieve.

"Ah," Aldrich laughed as his old hunting companion left one duck for another. "It's the dilemma of doubles."

The hunt was over. Aldrich sat quietly in his blind and surveyed the scene.

Pollution covered the nearby city with a disgusting haze as commuters hurried down the freeway. In this Great Salt Lake marsh on the old Jordan River delta, the hunter attempted to put feelings into words.

"I've tried to answer people when they ask me why I enjoy duck hunting," he began. "I can't say just one thing. Duck hunting's definitely a passion. Though I like hunting with friends, it's not a social thing."

"I enjoy quiet, early mornings on the marsh when you see a lot of birds. I love to call ducks in and see them respond. The dog's part of it, too."

"And I enjoy preparing and eating duck. I guess you could say that hunting offers so many opportunities to do things you enjoy."

Aldrich gathered the decoys and blinds and headed back to work. It was 10 a.m.

A YEAR WITH THE
Great Salt Lake

OCT. LEVEL: 4199.7 ABOVE SEA LEVEL 4.6" UNDER SEPT.

Lake Level Drops Below 4,200 Feet For First Time in Past 10 Years

The Great Salt Lake has dropped below the 4,200-foot elevation mark for the first time in 10 years.

Six years of below normal precipitation is causing the lake to decline at a rapid pace.

Brian McInerney, a hydrologist for the National Weather Service in Salt Lake City, says several factors are contributing to the lake's decline.

The dearth of water in rivers that flow into the lake is a major contributor. Aquifers around the lake also are beginning to dry up, eliminating another source of water.

And when the weather is warm for long periods of time, evaporation rates increase.

"The misconception is that, if we have an above average year for precipitation, that will put things back to normal," said McInerney. "That may not be the case. We may need five years of above average precipitation to bring us back to normal after five years of drought."

But what's normal?

In recent geologic history, the lake level has risen as high as the site of Temple Square in downtown Salt Lake City to a low point where the lake all but disappeared.

Records show that the lake level in October has steadily dropped since 1989, when it was at 4,205.5 feet.

Hunters' License Dollars Save Valuable Marshes

By Tom Wharton
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

When a hunter like Bill Kidder takes his decoys, dogs and duck calls to a Great Salt Lake marsh, he touches history.

"The marshes where we hunt — some public and some private — have been created by and for hunters," said Kidder, a Salt Lake dentist. "We feel a part of that. That is what makes it so much more pleasurable to hunt. The tradition of duck hunting dates back to the first explorers who came to this country."

In 1776, Catholic missionary Francisco Escalante dined on duck killed on Great Salt Lake marshes. Mountain man Jim Bridger talked of seeing "millions of ducks and geese" in 1824 when he drifted down the Bear River in a buffalo-hide boat.

"The whole morass was animated with multitudes of waterfowl, which appeared to be wild — rising for the space of a mile around about at the sound of a gun, with noise like distant thunder," wrote John C. Fremont, who explored the Bear River delta in 1843. "Several of the people waded out into the marshes, and we had tonight a delicious supper of ducks, geese and plover."

Hugh Hogle, a Salt Lake surgeon and third-generation hunter, remembers the stories his grandfather told him about hunting at the turn of the century. That's when black clouds of ducks darkened the skies over the Great Salt Lake.

In those days, some hunters made a living killing and selling ducks. It wasn't unusual to kill 200 to 250 ducks in a single day.

But hunters soon realized the error of their ways. To their dismay, they also discovered that the huge marshes of the Great Salt Lake began to disappear as water was used for other purposes.

Today, Hogle treasures the role hunters play in preserving the Great Salt Lake marsh system.

"If it were not for people with an interest in ducks, these marshes would have been drained, filled and industrialized years ago," he said.

Utah is a national leader in developing and preserving its historic marshes and waterfowl populations.

The state's territorial legislature passed laws as early as 1876 prohibiting the shooting of ducks during the spring nesting and summer-brood-rearing periods.

Fearful that waterfowl hunting in Utah might become an activity enjoyed only by the wealthy, the state began setting aside state and federal lands for public hunting in 1911.

"We have reached the condition where thousands of acres of the best duck ground have been taken by private clubs," Utah Fish and Game Commissioner H.B. Cromer wrote in 1907. "The general public is excluded from these grounds. This appears to me to be a great injustice upon the public and, if continued, will bring us to the same condition that exists in England where the general public is forbidden to shoot any wild game."

The Public Shooting Grounds, developed in 1923, is believed to be the first marsh in the United States developed so average citizens would have a place to hunt.

In 1928, Congress set aside 65,000 acres for the Bear River Bird Refuge, making it one of the first and largest refuges in the federal system.

Ogden Bay, constructed in 1937 by the Civilian Conservation Corps, was the first project built with Pittman-Robertson Act federal funding. Those funds, now a staple for wildlife projects throughout the United States, were generated by an excise tax placed on hunting equipment.

Not all original development came from dollars generated by hunters, though. The Civilian Conservation Corps — funded mostly with tax dollars — constructed Locomotive Springs in 1931, Farmington Bay in 1935 and Ogden Bay in 1937. But, since the federal duck-stamp program was established in 1934, the founding of Ducks Unlimited in 1937 and the start of Utah's duck stamp effort six years ago, hunters have provided most of the dollars to operate, maintain and enhance the refuges.

According to Tom Aldrich, chief waterfowl biologist for the Division of Wildlife Resources, the Great Salt Lake system now consists of 400,000 acres of marsh capable of producing between 500,000 and 750,000 ducks annually.

But some anti-hunters and conservation organizations attack the practice of hunting on federal refuges and call for an end to waterfowl hunting in those reserves.

This upsets many.

"Thank God there were hunters," says Phil Wag-

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Clubs Contribute to Lake's Wealth of Waterfowl

By Tom Wharton
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Most of Utah's 21,000 duck hunters spend their time on the public marshes surrounding the Great Salt Lake.

Wealthier waterfowlers, though, often join one of lake's 27 private duck clubs.

The quality and cost of the clubs vary. Annual membership dues range from \$150 to \$75,000.

Some clubs feature elegant club houses, specially-prepared blinds, guide services, cooks and staff members who pluck and clean ducks and geese.

Others are more basic. One, near the Bear River bird refuge, hosts members in old-fashioned canvas tents heated with wood stoves. Some feature only a few acres of flooded farm land and primitive blinds.

A few are so exclusive that a new member must be voted in by older patrons. In other cases, hunters simply pay a fee to join.

All contribute to the Great Salt Lake marsh system.

Reuben Dietz, who served as the manager of the venerable Bear River Duck Club for 11 years, now works as a biologist for the Division of Wildlife Resources. Properly managed clubs contribute to duck production, he said, noting that hunting groups have preserved 50,000 acres of prime wetlands.

"The good clubs are managed just like the state and federal management areas," said Dietz.

Clubs like the New State, Bear River, Ambassador, Harrison, Duckville and Chesapeake offer legendary hunting opportunities while providing a way for wealthy members to help raise ducks.

At the venerable Bear River Duck Club west of Brigham City, for example, club members kill about 150 geese a year. But between 500 and 600 goslings annually hatch on club marshes. Since it was founded in 1901, club members have contributed close to \$4 million to Ducks Unlimited — not to mention thousands of dollars in

taxes to Box Elder County.

"We are one of the few clubs which raise more ducks and geese than it shoots," boasts Bear River Duck Club manager Gary Slot. "The Audubon Society counted 89 different species of birds using our marsh during the spring."

The club's elegant, Victorian-style Bear River club house sits on the banks of the Bear River overlooking 12,000 acres of wetlands. Members eat on linen table cloths and must wear a coat and tie to dinner. Bull elk mounts guard the main room. Stuffed ducks and old decoys sit in glass cases. Pictures of past members hang on the walls. So does a print of a painting by legendary waterfowl artist Maynard Reese.

At the New State Club north of Farmington Bay, members enjoy the ambience of individual cabins located on canals. Many park hunting boats in "boat ports" which are connected to the cabins. The club earned its name because it was founded in 1896, the year Utah became a state.



Al Hartmann/The Salt Lake Tribune

The main room of the Bear River Duck Club's venerable clubhouse, first built in 1901, was restored to original elegance after being flooded by rising waters of Great Salt Lake in the 1980s.